

# **Cleaning and Caring for Solid Hardwood Furniture**

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What's the best way to care for wood furniture? Ask a few different people, and you'll probably get a few different answers. But the experts agree on a few wood-care basics. Your mother was right: DUST FREQUENTLY.

DO NOT USE A FEATHER DUSTER because it will simply move dust around, flinging it into the air. Feather dusters can't be washed, and a quill could scratch the wood surface if a feather breaks off. Dust is abrasive so infrequent or improper dusting can create a worn, dull surface over the years. Dust can accumulate in carvings, cracks and grooves and make wood look dark and unattractive. This dusty buildup eventually becomes hard to remove.

BE VERY CAREFUL USING WATER to clean wood. Wood should never get wet or soaked. Water can cause swelling, warping or staining when it penetrates a finish. Use coasters, pads, cloths or runners to protect against spills and water rings.

## **How to Dust**

You think you know how to dust? Here are some detailed tips from the experts. Use a clean, washable cloth made of soft, lint-free cotton. The best choices include an old T- shirt, diaper, cheesecloth, dishtowel, piece of flannel, or chamois. The cloth should have no snaps, buttons, zippers or thick seams that could scratch furniture surfaces. Do not use a cloth that has hanging threads or unraveling edges. These could catch on wood slivers, molding, knobs or other loose pieces.

## **Dry Dusting versus Damp Dusting**

Many experts believe that dusting with a dry cloth is abrasive and will ultimately dull the finish. A dry cloth will not really remove dust, they say. These experts typically recommend sprinkling a few drops of water onto the dusting cloth. The trick is to moisten the cloth just enough to make dust adhere to it. The cloth should not be so damp that it wets the wood. If you can see any trace of water on the wood after you wipe, your cloth is too damp. Some conservators recommend using distilled water for heirlooms or antiques. You might want to use a spray-on dusting aid or polish. If so, consider whether you want to apply silicone oil to your finishes. This type of oil is used in most commercial furniture sprays and polishes. To find out if your product contains silicone oil, consult the label or call the manufacturer.

## **Follow the Grain**

Wipe off dust using gentle, oval motions along the grain of the wood. Turn or fold the cloth as soon as dirt is visible on any section. Keep a pile of clean cloths handy so you don't move dust and dirt from one spot to another. Lift, don't slide, lamps and objects to dust under and around them. Avoid soiling adjoining upholstery. Launder soiled dusting cloths immediately.

## **Carefully Choose Wood Care Products**

It's no wonder there's a lot of confusion about what wood-care products to use. Store shelves are stacked with countless brands of wax, polish, spray and oil. Unless your furniture is sold as unfinished, or the finish has deteriorated, when you clean your furniture you're actually cleaning the finish, not the wood. Proper care can prolong the life of a finish, making the surface of furniture slippery so that objects slide along it without scratching. For new furniture, read manufacturers' tags and literature. Consider consulting a conservator for tips on caring for especially valuable antiques and heirlooms. One common myth is that wood furniture is "alive." It does not "breathe," so don't worry about clogging up pores with wax. It does not need to be "nourished" or "fed" with oily polishes. Changes in humidity, not a lack of oil, cause wood to crack.

PASTE WAX has been used for centuries as a finishing material and a furniture care product. If used properly, paste wax will provide a thick, hard, lasting finish. Liquid wax is similar, but typically provides a thinner coating. Waxes dry hard so they do not smear and attract dust and dirt. Paste wax typically lasts six months to a couple years, depending on how much the furniture is used and how many coats are applied. Paste wax will help delay the formation of water rings, giving you a little extra time to wipe up the moisture. Some people, especially antique lovers, prefer the soft sheen provided by waxes. Wax will not interfere with future refinishing. Make sure you buy a wax designed especially for wood furniture. Waxes for cars, shoes or other finishes might harm furniture.

OILY CLEANERS and polishes will not provide a lasting, hard coat. Those containing silicone oil will create a nice shine and a slippery surface, but they can interfere with refinishing. This type of oil can seep through cracks in the finish into the wood. That can ruin the new finish later. Be aware that labels often fail to say whether products contain silicone oil. Follow the manufacturers' instructions when using spray or liquid polishes. If you have waxed your furniture and want to switch to an oil-based polish or vice-versa, first clean the furniture with mineral spirits or a solvent-based wax remover. Do this in a spot with plenty of ventilation away from any heat source or sparks. First test the product you are using in an inconspicuous spot. When the piece is clean and dry, wax or polish. If you accidentally mix wax and oil, the finish will turn cloudy. In that case, wipe

the finish off and clean it with mineral spirits or a solvent-based wax remover. Wax or polish when the finish is dry.

**CLEAN BRASS HARDWARE** with caution. If the brass hardware on your furniture has a protective lacquer coating, it probably will not tarnish and will only need to be dusted. If the brass is tarnishing and you want to polish it, either remove the brass or slide a piece of mylar plastic behind the hardware so that the brass cleaner does not touch the finish.

## **Watch the Humidity**

Wood is very sensitive to changes in relative humidity. As the weather changes, so does the relative humidity in your home and in the moisture content of the wood in your furniture. This means that furniture is constantly expanding and contracting. Wood does best in moderate conditions of around 70 to 72 degrees Fahrenheit and a relative humidity of about 50 percent to 55 percent. That means using a humidifier in winter and an air conditioner in summer. Furniture ages more quickly if stored in a basement, attic, garage or warehouse. Excess heat and dryness can cause wood to split and crack. Place furniture away from all heat sources, if possible. If you must put furniture near an air duct, use a shield or guard plate to direct heat away.

Frequent and sudden changes in relative humidity are especially bad. Wood is most likely to crack when the climate in a home suddenly changes from hot and humid to cool and dry. Avoid placing furniture in front of radiators, heat runs or fireplaces. Store table leaves as close as possible to the table so they adjust to the same humidity conditions.

Here are more tips for dealing with relative humidity:

1. If furniture is to be stored, it generally does better in an unheated environment because the relative humidity will fluctuate within a much narrower range. Air can hold more moisture at a high temperature than at a low one.
2. Wood can best handle temperature and relative humidity changes if they occur gradually. Abrupt changes (closing or opening a vacation home, for example) can cause serious stress to your furniture.

## **Avoid Direct Sunlight**

The ultraviolet rays of the sun will damage a finish and bleach the wood underneath. Prolonged exposure to sunlight can cause the finish to crack, sometimes in a pattern resembling the skin of an alligator. Tablecloths and doilies slow down the process, but they don't stop it. Try to keep furniture out of

direct sunlight. When that's not possible, reduce the amount of light streaming on any piece of furniture. Consider planting shrubs in front of windows to block direct sunlight. Use window shades, drapes or blinds to block light during the time of day the furniture is exposed. Consider using UV screening films or tinting windows and skylights. Uniformly expose surfaces to light. Especially avoid letting the sun hit only part of a surface. Occasionally move lamps, doilies and other objects so the wood bleaches uniformly. Consider covering furniture with sheets or blankets if you leave your home for part of the year. Consider moving furniture around periodically so that the same piece does not absorb light all the time. Remember that some bleaching can be desirable. Antique collectors actually look for the rich, soft tones that slight fading can bring.

## **Avoid Chemical Exposure**

Keep solvents such as nail polish remover, alcohol and paint thinner away from wood furniture because they can harm the finish. Alcohol is contained in colognes, perfumes and medications as well as in wine, beer and liquor. Fingerprints, perspiration and body oils can harm a finish over time, especially on chairs. Plants and flower nectar that touch the finish can also cause permanent stains. Placing hot items on furniture can cause a chemical change in the finish that result in white rings or spots.

## **Keep Plastic Off Wood**

Do not leave plastic objects lying on wood surfaces. Color from plastic tablecloths, appliance covers, wrappers, place mats and toys can leach into wood over time. Plastic can also stick to a finish, damaging it when it is pulled up.

## **Guard Against Scratches**

Lift, don't slide, objects on wood. Place objects on trivets, tablecloths, doilies or others covers to protect the finish. Use felt bottoms on lamps and other decorative objects. Avoid brightly colored felt because its color could leach into the wood. Some experts say brown is the best color choice.

## **Carefully Move Furniture**

Lift heavy furniture with the help of at least two people. Sliding pieces could hurt the wood floor and damage furniture legs by applying too much sideways pressure. If a drawer has two handles, use both to open it. Don't stuff drawers with too many items.

# First Aid for Solid Hardwood Furniture

Repairing minor finish damage is easy. To help your project go smoothly, review these guidelines from Charles Sutton, president of Sutton House Furniture, a designer and consultant for fine furniture manufacturers.

## GLOSSARY OF FURNITURE REPAIR MATERIALS

--Boiled linseed oil: yellowish oil that serves as a lubricant. (Do not boil the linseed oil. It has already been boiled.) Source: hardware and home improvement stores, as well as paint stores.

--Mineral spirits: Often used to thin or clean up oil-based paints, stains and finishes. They can also be used to remove wax buildup on furniture and floors. Source: Hardware and home improvement stores as well as paint stores.

--Rotten stone: A fine, abrasive limestone powder. Source: Wood refinishing retailers who sell in specialty stores and via the Internet.

--Pumice: An abrasive (harder than rotten stone) derived from volcanic glass. Source: Wood refinishing retailers who sell in specialty stores and via the Internet.

**ALCOHOL SPILLS**, including cocktails, wine, medicine, perfumes and lotions.

What to do: Immediately blot or soak up the spill with a dry, cotton cloth. **DO NOT WIPE** because wiping will only spread the damage to more of the finish film. Treat the affected area with linseed oil mixed with either rotten stone or pumice. (Look below for descriptions and sources of these materials) Always rub gently in the direction of the grain. Finish by applying a furniture wax and buffing.

## CHEWING GUM

What to do: Harden the substance by applying an ice cube wrapped in plastic. Scrape away the gum with a smooth, straightedge plastic spatula or credit card. Do not press or push down into the furniture. Instead, scrape along the wood's surface in the direction of the grain. Clean the area with a cotton cloth that has been dampened lightly with water. Apply a furniture wax and buff.

## **SCRATCHES**

What to do: Superficial nicks and scratches that have cut into the finish film, or even cut all the way into the wood underneath, can be camouflaged with color treatment and waxing. Wax sticks in a variety of colors are available from the hardware store. Paste shoe polish applied with a cotton swab can be used to color the exposed wood. If the scratch is just on the top of the finish film and not very deep, a simple buffing with furniture wax will restore the luster to the finish.

## **WHITE RINGS AND WATER MARKS**

White rings or marks left by hot or cold containers are the result of moisture that has penetrated the finish film. The white or cloudy appearance means that moisture is trapped or suspended in the film.

What to do: To repair water marks, the moisture must be released by carefully sanding the finish film back below the damaged area. The key to this repair work is to stop short of cutting completely through the finish film and exposing the wood underneath. Using any one of the following materials, apply the material onto a dampened cotton cloth, not directly onto the finish film. Rub the affected area gently in the direction of the grain. Then dry and apply furniture wax to another clean cloth and buff.

### **Suitable materials for water mark repair:**

1. Baking soda.
2. Creamy white appliance polish.
3. Ammonia (non-soapy, not the detergent type).
4. Boiled linseed oil mixed with either pumice or rotten stone. (See below for descriptions and sources of these materials.)

## **STICKING PAPER**

Dampen the paper thoroughly with salad oil. Wait five minutes and rub along the grain with extra-fine steel wool (0000). Wipe dry.

## **WAX CRAYONS**

Use a furniture polish with a mineral spirits base. A little mild dishwashing liquid also sometimes works on crayons.

## **PRESSURE-SENSITIVE STICKERS**

Mild rubbing alcohol or mineral spirits will take the paper off. Mineral spirits will remove the glue.

## **LICK-ON STICKERS**

A little water usually will remove the stickers. Once the paper has been removed, the glue will re-soften and water should remove it.